

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Vessey, Mark, ed. *Erasmus on Literature: His Ratio or “System” of 1518/1519*. Translated with commentary by Robert D. Sider. Foreword by Anthony Grafton

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Overall, this brilliant and well-illustrated book confirms that bravura was one of the most cognitively demanding techniques of Renaissance painting. The brilliance of Suthor's analysis lies in her fresh terminology and perceptive language of description of even the smallest and most easily overlooked details of composition, and in her critical ability to relate such intricacies to larger issues taken up in paintings and in criticism. She writes in engaging, precise language, and makes persuasive connections with contemporary art criticism and modern aesthetics and cultural theory. Her book's relevance to literary criticism is clear, too. Instead of focusing on themes and topics that contextualize a painting from outside the work itself, Suthor shows us virtuosity and ambition at work in individual elements that create a rhetoric of painting. This same approach applies to the verbal art of the period. By zooming in on rhetorical techniques used in crafting literary works, instead of describing their external contexts, we can see the virtuosity and ambition that helped create complex, rhetorical compositions.

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**Vessey, Mark, ed.**

***Erasmus on Literature: His Ratio or "System" of 1518/1519. Translated with commentary by Robert D. Sider. Foreword by Anthony Grafton.***

Erasmus Studies. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. xx, 358 + 4 b/w ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0269-0 (hardcover) \$92.49; 978-1-4875-2210-0 (paperback) \$39.95.

This book is built around an English translation of Erasmus's *Ratio verae theologiae* (Guide to true theology) first published in 2019 as part of volume 41 of the *Collected Works of Erasmus*. CWE 41 is immensely learned, indeed it is immense: too large to carry and too expensive to assign as a text. *Erasmus on Literature* makes it possible for the *Ratio* to revive as an independent book, one worth study: a book with things to say about history, the Bible, and its interpretation. Erasmus first published the *Ratio* separately and it sold well. He

then inserted it into his revised *Novum Testamentum* (1518/19), instructing readers on how to read it.

It was bold of Erasmus to offer true theology, and bold of Mark Vessey to propose the *Ratio* as the single best text for understanding Erasmus on literature, what he meant by it, and how he went about reading it. Are there other candidates? Vessey doesn't say. Instead, he backs up his proposal with a foreword, introduction, and five scholarly essays. The proposal is tested by the *Ratio* itself, at last in English, affordable, debatable, and smart.

Anthony Grafton's foreword credits Erasmus for his insistence that interpretation must consider the historical circumstances of a text's composition, publication, and transmittal. Vessey's introduction expresses his hope that the *Ratio* will again be adopted as a teaching text, as it was five centuries ago. It is a high hope.

The first essay, also by Vessey, situates the *Ratio* in Erasmus's prodigious career, showing his consistency, progress, and depth. Brian Cummings's lively essay starts with "Confabulatio pia," an Erasmus colloquy depicting a young man trying to live the Christian life as directed in the *Ratio*. It's an excellent choice, leading to Erasmus's *De Copia* and his other instructional texts. As a guide to Erasmus on literature, including the *belle lettres* so beloved when he was younger, *Erasmus on Literature* could have used more of this.

Christopher Ocker shows what Erasmus got from his Scholastic precursors. Riemer Faber compares the *Ratio* as theory to Erasmus's biblical *Annotationes* as practice. The Ocker and Faber essays, useful excursions both, concern what Faber calls Erasmus's larger "New Testament project." Kathy Eden further prepares readers for this text on how to read. She discerns numerous types of comparison—*collatio*, *comparatio*, *parabola*, *similia*, etc.—that operate throughout the *Ratio*. Together, the five essays help the reader get into the *Ratio* and get a mindful out of it. There remains more to say on how the *Ratio* touches Erasmus's other literary work.

*Erasmus on Literature* provides an early exposition of the Bible as literature, but the *Ratio* was written to make better Christians, and while it makes the process clearer, it does not make it easy. In its first pages the *Ratio* iterates an Erasmus axiom: to read the Bible with the fullest understanding, a reader's "first concern" should be to learn Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Skip that, as most Bible readers do, and there are still other necessities of attitude and education. The *Ratio* recommends memorizing the New Testament, all of it, as Erasmus did.

One must recognize structure and metaphor, know etymology, topology, and history, and consider the contexts of writers and intended readers. The *Ratio* argues that by reading scripture well, one can raise Christ as if he were present, a tremendous claim for the power of literature.

The book comes well equipped. The English translation and notes by Robert D. Sider leave little to be desired. To better enable discussion about the book, he added an outline of the *Ratio*'s structure, and paragraph numbers to speed specific reference. The subtitle of *Erasmus on Literature* specifies the 1518/19 version of the *Ratio* but Sider adds text from the amplified 1520 and 1523 editions, too. Other apparatus is also excellent: name index, index to rhetorical terms, concordance to *CWE 41*, and (how Erasmian!) eighty pages of notes.

Fans of *Praise of Folly* and the *Colloquies* ought to open *Erasmus on Literature* to see what and how Erasmus wanted them to read. Scholars of theology will scrutinize the edition carefully, as Erasmus's contemporaries did. Seminaries in need of a book that teaches exegesis more thoroughly than Augustine now have one, ready for immediate use.

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